

CHARLES H GAGE

SUMMARY: Charles Gage talks to Pat Jasper about the 105 day strike, how containerization has drastically reduced man hours and segregated unions.

00:32

ILA offices in Webster, TX Sept 08, 2011

01:05

Native Houstonian. UH on basketball scholarship. Worked for SHELL for sometime. Followed father and uncles to the waterfront in 1946. Father and family moved to Genoa during WW 1, right up the street they had a truck farm and sold vegetables to an air force base in WW1. Was told by the McGowen family that the port was growing and looking for workers. Father and uncles joined and later joined the union. Father died at 56 but was President and VP of local 1276 when he died. Rolled cotton, and was walking foreman for a while. Then went to work for Canadian Gulf land for 20 years. Then back to Union hall. Have 5 children.

05:08

first day on the docks, was 16 years old. Saw people loading pig iron on a railcar. A rail car has pieces of pig iron and it comes with a magnet to pick it up. Trimming grain - had to build a theater when you loaded grain. While pouring grain into the ship, it would not go to the corners, so men were shoveling it into the corners to make sure a federal law was followed. Men ended up with mouth disease. No water keg, but had a water bucket that everyone drank out of. No cups. A lot of foreman were drunks. Worked in a lot of ports, Houston as the cleanest of them all.

09:00

Filled in when someone quit in the gang handled by father and uncle. AT 16 could not do something that involved strenuous manual labor, but helped around on a lot of summer days. Uncle Clarence was a ship superintendent, Uncle Jim had a gang, father had a gang and uncle walter had a gang. Father was VP of local 1273. Was a mailman with Shell oil. Crossed the picket line with scooter everyday of the strike. Went to work on docks in 1949.

13:25

Strike at Shell. Striking for better conditions and better wages. oil field company workers went on strike, Father would not even get a haircut if it was not at union barbershop. Houston was more of a union town. When people from the North started moving to Texas, it changed from a democratic state to a Republican state. No use for a Union man.

Will see a turnaround when the change comes. Right now people are made to work for minimum wage with no health insurance and no benefits.

17:00

Quit Shell because did not want to cross picket line. Waterfront was good for family. Primarily rolled cotton, with cotton got paid by the bale. Whereas longshore work was paid by the hour. Could work cotton for \$3.50 an hour instead of regular work that paid \$1.15 an hour. Rolled cotton daily for 7-8 years. Went to work for Young & Company for 3 years. Liberty Steel Doors for a few years. Canadian Gulf Line was a prestigious place to work. Was called and offered a job. Superintendent. Still got paid through the union. 1982 young men were disgruntled with the work given. Worked with real estate for a while. Just decided one morning to put in for retirement after 30 years.

22:05

Was part of union even though was working exclusively for some companies. Not standard practice. Was second generation on the waterfront. never brought children to the waterfront.

24:10

Was on a strike for 4 months in 1961 or 1962. Container royalty. Two different wages in Houston. Containers make \$12-15 an hour, more than the regular workers do now. Back then it was all one wage. President named Willie Wales. While he was on the Port Commission, they took a trip to Japan. Seen the first container ships being built. Came back and told everyone what to get prepared for. Politics got involved, started pushing older men aside and set up seniority system. A, B, or C button. 25 years or more got AA button. Left for real estate. Then got involved again in early 90s with the retirees.

27:31

Elected President of the retirees. Got everyone and their wives involved Started having meals together and also brought in some speakers from the union to talk. Container royalty. Each year workers get about \$30,000. Retirees don't get a penny of that. The retirees had been on strike for 4 months so that present day workers could get container royalty. Feel like they should give about 5-10% of that to retirees.

30:00

Waterfront had a lot of ignorant people. Was informed by Willie that containers were coming and that it was going to kill the industry. Has cut the man-hours more than half. At first there were wenches and booms that took cargo on and off the ships. No electric wenches. Wenches worked on steam. Only one container company in the world called Sea-land. Through the years, containerizations has really strangled the industry. The only places that take ships with no containers are those that are too small to handle containers. Has cut the man hours down tremendously. Pension was set on man hours. When containerization hit, it cut man hours going in pension by half. Made a mistake during the

strike by not getting container royalty by the ton. Money would have been better. Move 1500 -2000 containers in 10 hours. Can move as much tonnage in a day as can be done in a week. When pension, welfare and vacation were first introduced the people that fought it the most were the ones that needed it the most. Willie Wales and Raymond Duncan helped tide over the crisis.

37:12

Biggest mistake was never made any change to the insurance paying into the pension, welfare and vacation plan. Man hours decreased and the insurance has been frozen. Tough to be on strike for 4 months. There was a grocery store on Canal's called Richie's Grocery that told the union hall they were willing to provide groceries until the strike was settled. They were faithful and went there for 4 months and managed to pay them back at the end of the strike, Were a blessing. Tough strike, had to struggle a lot for what the future employees are getting today.

40:35

Segregated unions. When started out as a walking foreman, unions were segregated. After a strike, the black local wanted a walking foreman on their end of the ship. They got it and did not need someone else watching over them. Walking foreman was white for a long time. This strike was in the 70s. Even though segregated, gave each union a sense of autonomy and control. Knew the merger was coming and that there would be a lot of hatred. Hence, got out of this. There has been a lot of difference since.

43:22 ((SAYS YOU CANNOT PUT THIS IN WRITING))

""White man always worked harder than they did and made more tonnage. When they merged the two black and whites together then they seen the speed they work, and they all come down their speed. It has been a big problem in Houston. All kinds of different rules and regulations down there now."

No complaints. "Waterfront was good to me, helped me raise my family and can never say anything really bad and I will be a union man till they put me in my grave."

44:37

ILA retirees organization. Have people from the deep sea local, time keepers local and the car loaders local. Meet every third Wednesday at noon. Have a guest speaker. Blossomed into a wonderful thing.

46:30

Gulf wives local merged with the deep sea local. Clerks and checkers union and the car loaders. Deep sea loaded anything that crossed the ocean. Couple of shore lines that ran between New York and Houston. ILA locals were also merged along with the black and white locals.

49:48

Had the privilege of working with people of every nation. got to know people from all over the world. Still close friends. Hear from them once in a while. Interesting, wonderful job. Delta ship line - brought all the paper to Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth. brought it from Canada or British Columbia till they sold out. Fascinating life. No two ships load the same way. Working with people from all over the world. Was city councilman in Pearland.

Track 2

1:12:13

Nickname is Earthworm from Elmer Kimlin. IN 1951 was working flour in a ship Very cold day. He kept pouring cold water. at lunch time poured a water keg of water on him and he cursed saying earthworm looking.... Lot of history on the docks.